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ABSTRACT

This digest uses recent statistics, including Census 2000 data, to synthesize information on Asian and Pacific Islander American (APIA) children and families. The APIA population is diverse, and APIA groups vary widely in language, religion, beliefs, and health practices. The percentage of foreign born differs widely among APIA groups. The U.S. west is home to nearly half of all APIAs. Nearly one-third of APIAs reside in California, and over two-thirds of Hawaii's population consists of APIAs. Many first-generation APIAs established their own communities within American cities. Local services developed in these communities allowed APIAs of a single ethnicity to learn English and transition into a new life, with cultural and linguistic support benefiting families who remained in the communities. Educational completion rates differ widely among APIA groups. As a group, APIAs share no common language. Nearly two-thirds speak a non-English language at home. Support for English language learning and translation services is limited for APIAs. In 1997, the overall median income of APIA families and non-Hispanic whites was comparable, though there was great economic diversity among APIA groups. Employment and unemployment rates of APIAs in 1999 were equivalent to those of non-Hispanic whites, with APIAs more concentrated in managerial and professional specialty occupations than non-Hispanic whites. (SM)

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DIGEST

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THE ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER POPULATION IN THE U.S.

There are an estimated 12 million Asian and Pacific Islander Americans (APIAs) in the United States, or about 4 percent of the total population (compared with African Americans, at 12 percent, and Latinos, at 11 percent). APIAs comprise one of the fastest growing groups in the nation; over the last decade there was a 69 percent growth in that population, and their number is expected to reach 20 million by 2020. Most APIAs reside in urban areas, but the differences among their various groups are often greater than their similarities.

High fertility rates and the immigration of APIAs are major reasons for the anticipated increase in their number. Children are becoming an even more significant proportion of the APIA population, and will constitute an increasingly larger segment of the public school population. Schools will need to become knowledgeable about the unique qualities of APIA students and their families and respond to their special educational and social needs.

This digest, drawn from the most recent statistics collected, including 2000 Census data where available, synthesizes information on Asian and Pacific Islander American children and their families. The digest's goal is twofold: (1) to help educators working with this population better understand their backgrounds and living conditions, in order to provide the children with effective educational and other services and to communicate effectively and sensitively with their families; and (2) to help policy makers and program developers equitably allocate resources for these services based on accurate information about local concentrations of APIAs. A bibliography of the sources used here appears at the end of the digest for those interested in obtaining more data.

The Ethnic Makeup of APIAs

The nation's APIA population is diverse. APIAs may originate from either the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian Subcontinent. They comprise at least seven different ethnicities, including (in descending order of proportion) Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Asian Indian, Korean, Vietnamese, and Hawaiian. Asian Indians are the fastest growing group, whereas the number of Japanese in the U.S. has declined over the last decade.

Because of the great differences in their places of origin, ethnicities, and number of generations in the U.S., the various APIA groups vary widely in many characteristics, such as language, religion, beliefs, and health practices.

Immigration and Nativity of APIAs

The percentage of foreign born differs widely among APIA groups; for example, in 2000, only 23 percent of Japanese Americans were immigrants as compared with 76 percent of Vietnamese Americans. Overall, 49.2 percent of APIAs are foreign born, a decline of over 17 percentage points from the previous decade, indicating that the share of foreign-born APIAs is declining.

Asians have generally opted to become naturalized citizens rather than permanent resident aliens in the U.S., if they are able to meet the requirements. In fact, Asians have tended to become naturalized at a faster rate than have immigrants from other countries. Naturalization status allows them access to a variety of Federal and state services unavailable to other immigrants.

Places of Residence in the U.S.

All APIAs. The U.S. West—California, Hawaii, and Texas, in particular—is home to nearly half of all APIAs. More than two-thirds of Hawaii's population consists of APIAs. APIAs comprise 12 percent of California's total population; 36 percent of the total U.S. APIA population lives in California. Two East Coast states—New York and New Jersey—also have significant APIA populations. The cities with the largest Asian population are New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

Immigrants. Nearly one-third of Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants reside in California, with two cities—Los Angeles and San Francisco—accounting for nearly a quarter of the nation's APIA immigrant population.

Community and Family Life

Like immigrants of other ethnicities, many first-generation Asian groups established their own communities within U.S. cities. Decades ago, Chinatowns were established in several cities; more recently, Korean and the various Indochinese immigrants and refugees established their own urban enclaves. Filipino and Asian Indian immigrants, on the other hand, scattered throughout the country.

Local services developed in these separate communities enabled APIA immigrants of a single ethnicity to learn English and to make a transition into a new life. Cultural and linguistic supports continued to benefit the families who remained in those communities. For example, local health services provide accessible, affordable, and culturally competent care to community members in their native language. Nevertheless, each succeeding generation of immigrants tends to scatter into less segregated areas.

APIA households are larger than the U.S. average: 4.1 Asians and 3.8 Pacific Islanders per household as compared with the nation's overall rate of 3.2. In urban areas, where most APIAs reside, overcrowding is a problem; APIAs are eight times more likely than whites to live in a home with more than one person per room.

Educational Attainment

Educational completion rates of the various Asians and Pacific Islander groups differ widely. In 1999, when 6.6 million APIAs and 130.4 million non-Hispanic whites 25 years and older lived in the U.S., 42 percent of APIAs had a bachelor's degree

while only 28 percent of non-Hispanic whites had one. A higher proportion of men than women in both groups earned a bachelor's degree: for APIAs, 46 percent and 39 percent; and for non-Hispanic whites, 31 percent and 25 percent.

The high school graduation rate was nearly the same for both groups: 85 percent for APIAs and 88 percent for non-Hispanic whites. However, while only 5 percent of non-Hispanic whites had less than a ninth grade education, 8 percent of APIAs had such limited schooling.

There are wide differences in educational completion among the APIA groups. For example, in 1990 (the last year for which such data are available) the Asian Indian and Japanese high school graduation rates were higher than the average APIA rate, but only 31 percent of Hmong graduated from high school.

Language

APIAs as a group share no common language. Indeed, they may speak one of 100 languages and dialects. Even within an ethnic group, such as the Chinese, there may be no common verbal language.

Nearly two-thirds of APIAs speak an Asian or Pacific Islander language at home. Over one-third do not live in communities where their native language is spoken. The English language proficiency of Pacific Islanders is least limited; it is most limited for Southeast Asians.

APIA children speak English at home at a higher rate than Latinos of their same generation of nativity, according to the 1990 Census. Nearly 11 percent of first generation APIA children speak English at home, compared with less than 3 percent of Latinos. For second generation children, the APIA rate rises to nearly 50 percent (16 percent for Latinos), and for the third generation, it is more than 85 percent (66 percent for Latinos).

Support for English language learning and the availability of translators are limited for APIAs, with speakers of some languages often nearly totally isolated in many social and health services settings. Even in parts of the U.S. with a sizable APIA population, some specific services for limited English speaking APIAs, such as recovery programs, are nonexistent.

Economic Status

Income. In 1997 the overall median income of APIA families and non-Hispanic whites was comparable: over $45,000 compared with nearly $41,000. There is, however, great economic diversity among APIA groups. For example, in 1990, the income of Japanese Americans exceeded that of non-Hispanic whites, whereas Cambodian Americans earned less than African American families. Then, in 2000, Japanese Americans were outearned by Asian Indians, while Vietnamese immigrants had the lowest income among APIAs. In general, income level rises along with the number of generations a group has been in the U.S.

Poverty Levels. The poverty rates for different APIA groups also vary widely. In 1997 the overall poverty rate for APIAs was 14 percent—higher than the 9 percent rate for non-Hispanic whites, but lower than the 27 percent rate for African Americans and Latinos. More than 20 percent of APIA families had incomes below $25,000, as compared with 19 percent of non-Hispanic white families.

Within the APIA population, more than 60 percent of Hmong Americans and 40 percent of Cambodian Americans were living in poverty, but only 7 percent of Japanese Americans and 6 percent of Filipino Americans were below the poverty line.

About 18 percent of APIAs younger than 18 were poor in 1998, compared with 11 percent of non-Hispanic white children.

APIA Employment

The employment and unemployment rates of APIAs in 1999 were equivalent to those of non-Hispanic whites, with men represented more heavily in both groups. Overall, APIAs are more highly concentrated in managerial and professional specialty occupations (i.e, doctors, lawyers, engineers) than are non-Hispanic whites: 37 percent and 33 percent.

The two manufacturing sectors with a concentration of APIA immigrants are the garment industry, which employs women primarily, and the electronics industry in Silicon Valley. Both sectors frequently pay workers by the piece completed, with the result that immigrants earn less than the minimum wage. Both sectors also offer poor working conditions, and individuals who work at home often expose their families to hazardous materials.

APIA immigrants, given their smaller number, are also overrepresented in the small business sector: in 1997, APIAs owned 1.1 million small businesses, compared with 1.4 million for Latinos and 880,000 for African Americans. In general, according to Marguerite Ro (2002), minority-owned businesses suffer from small profits that translate into underpaid employees, the recruitment of family members as unpaid labor, and no health benefits for anyone. Large families provide APIA business owners with more resources than other minority owners, but language problems and a dependence on ethnic clientele can mitigate any other advantages.

—Wendy Schwartz, Teachers College, Columbia University

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